



TEXTUAL PATRIARCHY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF MAJEED'S GIFT TO THE BRIDE

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Abstract

One of the key aspects of the paper is its interrogation of how patriarchal norms and religious ideologies intersect to censor and control women's behaviour and agency. Through a critical reading of "Tohfa-e-Dulhan," the paper seeks to unravel the ways in which women are depicted, restricted, and subjugated within the text, shedding light on the broader systems of oppression that operate within society. The analysis of "Tohfa-e-Dulhan" offers valuable insights into the intersection of patriarchal and religious hegemony within historical texts, particularly in the context of 19th-century India. By examining the socio-political and religious landscape of the time, the paper aims to uncover the underlying power dynamics and ideologies that shape the portrayal of women and their activities in the text. Furthermore, by contextualizing the text within its historical milieu, the paper provides a nuanced understanding of the socio-political forces at play during the 19th century in India. Overall, the paper offers a critical perspective on "Tohfa-e-Dulhan" and similar texts, highlighting the need for continued examination of the ways in which patriarchal and religious ideologies intersect to shape gender relations and perpetuate systems of oppression. Through this analysis, the paper contributes to ongoing conversations about gender, power, and representation in literature and society.

Introduction

M.H.A Majeed's '*Gift to Bride*' (*Tohfa-e-Dulhan*) is a book that gained popularity and recognition among Deobandi scholars in the early 20th century during the reform and revivalist movement of Islam in India. Majeed wrote two texts- '*Tohfa-e-Dulha*' (Gift to Groom) and '*Tohfa-e-Dulhan*' (Gift to the Bride) which explores gendered paradigms within the institution of marriage.

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Though *Tohfa-e-Dulhan* was written first and is more extensive compared to *Tohfa-e-Dulha*. It was intended as a wedding gift for brides from their paternal side, providing them with detailed guidelines and codes of behaviour to follow after marriage.

‘The most valuable asset in the world is a pious wife.’ (M.H.A Majeed)

The primary objective of this book was to make Muslim women aware about their deeds and role as a wife. The book begins by acknowledging that the duty of husband and wife towards each other needs to be fulfilled with an intention to please Allah. Majeed claims that the foundation love and affection between the couple depends more on the ‘nature, wisdom and pleasant-naturedness of the wife’ (pg-i). To address the role of a Muslim bride/wife, Majeed refers them with phrases such as- ‘beauty and ray of hope in a man’s life’, ‘primary source of comfort and solace’, ‘blows the spirit into man’s life’, ‘women are the nucleus of society and embellishment of mankind’ (pg-7,9). The concept of a wife's agency, according to Majeed and other ulema (Islamic scholars), should be regulated within the tenets of Islamic law (Sharia). According to this view, a "good woman" is considered to be the queen of her home and has the authority to command her husband within the framework of Shariah. However, before assuming this command, certain sacrifices are expected of her, symbolized by wearing a "crown of thorns" before adorning a "crown of roses" (pg-8). This perspective reflects the belief that women are subject to Islamic Shariah rather than being its legislators. In other words, it suggests that women are expected to adhere to the principles and regulations set forth by Shariah rather than actively participating in the formulation or interpretation of these laws.

The purpose of the book is to inform Muslim brides on proper behaviour, manners, and activities before and after they enter their husband's home. Majeed expresses gratitude to *Rashul-ullah*¹ for liberating women from negative actions and guiding them towards leading a religious life. Majeed credits the Prophet for freeing women from ignorance, foolish customs, and traditions that may have held them back and adversely affected their married life (pg-5). Majeed's book takes a subversive position regarding the role of women, suggesting that their role goes beyond mere submission and can be likened to that of a slave, where they must surrender themselves completely. The book emphasises the importance of piety and moral virtue in cultivating family values, and it asserts that religious education is the primary medium for achieving this. However, it is worth noting that the book restricts women's education to religious knowledge alone. The underlying politics behind this approach may be aimed at strengthening the moral foundation for women. However, the circulation of such texts and their descriptions indicate that women were not only being directed but were also being confined within a religious framework that prescribed their position.

What sets this book apart is its emphasis on the domains and codes of Sharia as crucial for realizing the Islamic principles of marriage and conjugality. It goes beyond the mere legal aspects of Sharia to delve into the phenomenology of everyday life. In other words, it provides guidance not only on legal matters but also on the practical aspects of married life within an Islamic framework. Majeed replicates a very patriarchal perspective on the function and conduct of women in marriage,

¹ Rasulallah refers to the last Prophet in Islam-Prophet Muhammad

where women are held entirely accountable for their actions and choices. In this book, Majeed holds women accountable for spending extravagantly and unnecessarily on marriage ceremonies. Additionally, he criticizes women for demanding high dowries for their marriages and asserts that the "best" women are those who demand less. This perspective places the burden of responsibility on women for the expenses associated with marriage and implies that their desires and demands lead to wasteful spending. It also suggests that women who ask for smaller dowries are considered more virtuous or admirable, and deviating from the prescribed expectations may lead to being labelled as impious or irreligious.

Majeed cites examples of Hazrat Khatija,² Hazrat Fatima,³ Hazrat Ummu Hakeem,⁴ Hazrat Rukkaya⁵ and many others who are portrayed as leading pious lives, listening to their husbands, and obeying them as notable figures in Islamic history. The author likely includes these examples to present role models for Muslim women and emphasize the importance of these virtues. According to Majeed these women have gained revered status in Islamic history due to their religious, social, moral, and ethical virtues, setting them apart from other women.

Furthermore, the author places blame and responsibility on women for various issues within marriages and family dynamics. It suggests that failed marriages can be attributed to conflicts between women (in-laws), disobedience of wives, and women asserting their educational superiority. From a feminist perspective, this text appears to be highly oppressive towards women, portraying them as objects solely responsible for upholding religious duties and being submissive to men.

The verses and poems he mentions in the book presents a perspective that promotes a traditional gender role for women, emphasizing their duty to obey their husbands and prioritize their needs and desires. The author suggests that for a woman to earn her husband's love, she should overlook his faults, remain silent during his anger, accept blame for any wrongdoing, and fulfil his requests without question. This portrayal can be seen as oppressive and disempowering towards women. It reinforces patriarchal expectations that limit women's autonomy and agency within relationships, suggesting that women should be submissive and self-sacrificing, thus restraining the importance of individual autonomy, communication, and equitable power dynamics within relationships.

In this book, Majeed also describes several songs and dialogues between mother and daughter in which a mother is preparing her daughter for the wedding.

*“Look, the carriage has come
Let me weep till my heart is done.
If I cannot weep as much as I would like
Just allow my heart to become light
I suppose I will have to leave*

² The first wife of Prophet Muhammad who at the age of 40 and a widow sent a marriage proposal to marry prophet. She was also the first woman to accept Islam.

³ The most beloved daughter of Prophet Muhammad.

⁴ A female *sahaba* (companion) and aunt of Prophet Muhammad.

⁵ One of the daughters of Prophet Muhammad.

*Leave the ties of love that seem impossible to R
retrieve what shall my adobe be?
To see what you have done for me
Out of your home you have cast me
A disgrace of fate What banishment of late!"* (pg.- 306-307)

The mother replies back to the daughter-
"Listen well, O my broken-hearted one
All that has happened in your turn has come
This period dawns on every child
The bridge has to be crossed by everyone
meek and mild
The time of separation does arrive
From every mother comes this advice so sincere
Never forget it, never disregard it my treasured dear
Always serve your husband well
Fulfil his wishes before he can tell
You will flower and bear fruit too
If you remember what I have just said to you
In certain way the husband is unto his wife
Like her Rabb, the Giver of her life
He will always keep her happy and content
If she devotedly remains his, doing nothing without his consent." (pg.- 309-310)

The scenario portrays a mother preparing her daughter for marriage by discussing the significance of a husband in her life. The mother also warns the daughter about the notion of consent, suggesting that after marriage, the wife's agency will become secondary to her husband's, implying a loss of autonomy and decision-making power. By cautioning her daughter about the potential loss of agency and the subordination of her own will, the mother is acknowledging and reinforcing these gendered power imbalances. However, the cautionary message given by the mother suggests that after marriage, the wife's consent may be undermined or overshadowed by the dominance of her husband's will. This reflects a problematic dynamic that can lead to the marginalization and suppression of women's voices and choices within the context of marriage. Marriages have historically been characterized by patriarchal norms and power dynamics, where men hold more authority and control over women's lives. This can manifest in various ways, such as through societal expectations that prioritize the husband's wishes and decisions over the wife. By acknowledging and discussing these issues, the narrative sheds light on the limitations imposed on women's agency within patriarchal systems. Such depiction highlights the fragile position of women within marriages and sheds light on the hierarchical structures that perpetuate and reinforce patriarchy.

Conclusion

The analysis of texts like "Gift to the Bride" unveils a complex interplay between various socio-political and religious factors, particularly in response to orientalist narratives about Muslim societies. While these texts may have initially emerged as a form of political and religious response, they have had significant implications for the agency and autonomy of Muslim women. By framing women's behavior and actions within strict visions of piety and orthodoxy, texts like "Gift to the Bride" contribute to the erasure of women's agency and autonomy. Instead of empowering women to operate as autonomous individuals within society, these texts impose patriarchal norms and restrictions, ultimately leading to the subjugation of Muslim women.

Furthermore, by presenting a patriarchal voice under the guise of religiosity, these texts perpetuate systems of oppression that limit women's freedom and self-expression. Rather than challenging Orientalist narratives, they reinforce stereotypes and control mechanisms that further marginalize Muslim women. In essence, while texts like "Gift to the Bride" may have been intended as responses to external critiques, they ultimately contribute to the subjugation and oppression of Muslim women by imposing rigid gender roles and restricting women's agency within society.

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